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ABSTRACT

This working paper is a product of a regional study in industrial South Wales of the determinants of participation and non-participation in post-compulsory education and training, with special reference to processes of change in the patterns of these determinants over time and to variations between geographical areas. Discussion begins with an examination of the way in which the official discourse of the learning society is dominated by a particular social theory of lifelong learning, called human capital theory. It demonstrates that human capital theory involves an unwarranted abstraction of economic behavior from social relations more widely, maintaining that participation in lifetime learning cannot be understood in terms of the narrow calculation of utility maximization. This critique provides the basis for the development of the lineaments of a theoretical account in which learning behavior is conceived as the product of individual calculation and active choice, but within parameters set by both access to learning opportunities and collective norms--parameters that vary systematically over space and time so that place and history must accordingly play a central role in any adequate theorization. The paper concludes that this kind of theoretical approach has important implications for empirical research and strategies aimed at creating a learning society. (Contains 49 references and 16 notes.) (YLB)

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PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

A Cardiff and Bristol University ESRC- funded Learning Society Project

WORKING PAPER 6

Notes Towards a Social Theory of Lifetime Learning History, Place and The Learning Society

Gareth Rees, Ralph Fevre, John Furlong, and Stephen Gorard

1997

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Cardiff University of Wales

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LIST OF CONTENTS PAGE NUMBER

Introduction	1
The official discourse of the learning society	2
A sociological critique of human capital theory	4
Towards a social theory of lifetime learning	8
Concluding comments	17
References	19
Notes	23

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INTRODUCTION

The principal aim of this paper is to begin to shift the debate on the Learning Society away from the normative focus which has predominated hitherto. We take the development of an adequate social theory of lifetime learning to be a necessary condition of creating a Learning Society, however conceived. Accordingly, rather than beginning with questions about what a Learning Society ought to constitute, we seek to engage initially with issues of what patterns of participation in learning through the life-course actually are and of how best to understand their determinants. More specifically, we wholly agree with Coffield's (1996) argument that:

"...we need a more powerful social theory of learning which will encompass not only the cognitive processes within the heads of individuals but

also the social relationships and arrangements which stimulate learning." (p.9)

Our analytical emphasis is thus on lifetime learning as a set of social relations, which can be illuminated by insights drawn from sociological analysis. Indeed, in some respects, our project is to counterpose sociological reasoning against other, more dominant forms of theory.

Our discussion begins with a brief examination of the way in which the official discourse of the Learning Society is dominated by a particular social theory of lifetime learning: human capital theory. For this reason alone, the critical evaluation of the latter is a serious undertaking. What we demonstrate is that human capital theory involves an unwarranted abstraction of economic behaviour from social relations more widely; participation in lifetime learning cannot be understood in terms of the narrow calculation of utility maximisation. This critique provides the basis for the development of at least the lineaments of a more satisfactory theoretical account, in which learning behaviour is conceived as the product of individual calculation and active choice, but within parameters set by both access to learning opportunities and collective norms. Moreover, these parameters, by their very nature, vary systematically over space and time: accordingly, place and history must play a central role in any adequate theorisation. We conclude that this kind of theoretical approach has important implications not only for empirical research (of the kind on which we are currently engaged), but also for strategies aimed at creating a Learning Society.

THE OFFICIAL DISCOURSE OF THE LEARNING SOCIETY

Coffield (1996) has recently drawn attention to the marked commonalities in state policies - both at the level of national governments and supra-national organisations - with respect to the building of a Learning Society. The latter is conceived primarily in terms of objectives of economic growth and well-being. More particularly, he emphasises the crucial role accorded to the individual actor in this official discourse and the limitations which this imposes on effective strategy. Economic competitiveness, it is argued, is dependent on a highly skilled labour force; and, hence, economic growth primarily reflects the capacities of individual workers to acquire these

necessary skills and competences. Some official accounts (for example, European Commission, 1996) extend this analysis to consider the distributional consequences of the achievement of such economic growth. What would be the effects on employment levels ? Who would have access to jobs ? What would be the impacts on wider patterns of social integration and exclusion ? Others are notably silent on these issues (for example, Department for Education and Employment, 1995).

These arguments can usefully be developed by locating this emphasis on the individual actor within the wider analysis of the relationships between education and training and economic development, of which it forms part. This wider analysis, we suggest, is that derived from human capital theory.[1] In Schultz's (1961) initial formulation, the crucial benefits of investment in human capital are set out: where returns to other forms of capital are constant or decreasing, the development of human capital, primarily through education and training, will constitute the prime source of economic growth. Accordingly, it is in the interests of employers and, where necessary, the state to ensure that such investment in human capital takes place. Crucially, however, it also follows that for individuals seeking access to desirable employment opportunities, their self-interest will be served by personal investment in the acquisition of qualifications and experience. Indeed, as Becker (for example, 1975) argues, participation in education and training may be considered as a form of market behaviour, involving the rational calculation of the total benefits to be derived, setting current real income foregone (through, for example, remaining in education) against enhanced opportunities of future rewards (such as better job prospects, higher wages and so on).

What this implies, therefore, is that the scope for effective state intervention is circumscribed (as is perhaps most clearly illustrated in recent British policy in this field). Basic educational provision clearly needs to be guaranteed. Some employers may require help and encouragement to provide the most effective forms of training. However, perhaps most pertinently for the current discussion, the participation of the bulk of (prospective) employees in education and training will follow automatically from a "natural" calculation of the benefits which will flow to them in the future. Hence, the role of the state in this context is to ensure that they are fully aware of the nature and scope of the learning opportunities which are available to them and the

specific advantages which will derive from their participation; and it may be that the provision of appropriate guidance will be necessary to achieve this (Rees and Bartlett, 1996). In short, therefore, market mechanisms - albeit facilitated by limited state interventions - will ensure the achievement of the desired patterns of lifetime learning at some point in the future. Indeed, the Learning Society itself comes to be conceived exclusively as a desirable future state: a target to be achieved, where maximum social benefits will be ensured through the effective operation of market processes.[2]

We wish to argue, on the contrary, that participation in education and training cannot properly be understood as being determined within a sui generis economic realm. Human capital theory involves an unwarranted abstraction of behaviour with respect to lifetime learning from the social relations in which it is encompassed. This, in turn, provides the analytical basis for an over-simplified view of strategy and a conception of the Learning Society itself which is impoverished.

A SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

As we have seen, then, human capital theory has implications both for wider patterns of economic development and for the market behaviour of individuals. The former dimension is concerned with the relationships between economic growth at the national or regional level and investment in human capital; and the latter offers an account of decision-making with respect to participation in education and training. It is the latter which is of principal concern here and on which subsequent discussion focuses (although the former poses important questions with respect to strategies for building a Learning Society too: see Rees, 1996). To simplify somewhat, this particular aspect of human capital theory shares many of the characteristics of more general neo-classical analysis of market behaviour (cf. Fevre, 1997). In particular, it is based upon the assumptions which underpin the latter: namely, that individuals will seek to maximise their material well-being (or utility) in economic transactions; that they possess full knowledge of market conditions; and that they will act rationally to achieve their preferences in the light of this knowledge (see, for example, Martinelli and Smelser, 1990: 29). Accordingly, individuals will choose to undertake education and training to

the extent that they are aware of the opportunities available and that they are able to maximise material returns through doing so.

Recent developments in the sociology of economic life have renewed the critique of such neo-classical economic theory (for example, Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; Smelser and Swedberg, 1994; Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990).[3] Most generally, the absolute differentiation between economic and social life which it implies, and the consequent tendency for individuals to be governed by exclusively material motivations, are rejected. As Lazar (1996) has recently put it:

> *"...for sociological analysis, economic action is a form of social action, not merely a matter of individuals acting in pursuit of individual interests, and must not be analysed as if it exists in a rarefied realm with its peculiar, autonomous form of motivation."* (p.600)

What are emphasised, then, are the continuities between economic action and institutions, on the one hand, and wider social networks and organisations, on the other. Hence, for example, behaviour in economic markets is, in Polanyi's (1957) term, "embedded" in systems of social relations, particularly networks of interpersonal relations. Moreover, as, of course, Durkheim argued in his famous critique of utilitarian approaches as a whole (Fevre, 1997), economic markets have characteristic normative bases (in the same way as the more obvious cases of exchange based on "reciprocity" or "redistribution") (Polanyi, 1957). And to these might be added the pervasive influence of differential power between social groups

This dissolution of the boundary between economic action and social relations more widely has more specific consequences for the ways in which the determinants of individual behaviours are conceptualised. Most obviously, the neo-classical formulation ignores the possibility that individuals may pursue ends (or have preferences) which are different from straightforward maximisation of material well-being. This potential for a diversity of preferences may be conceived, in Weberian terms, as reflecting different value positions (although the latter, in turn, may be shaped within normative structures: see below). Hence, for example, an employee may undertake a programme of training because he or she prizes the intrinsic pleasure obtained from the programme or from the enhanced capacity to do a job, even where

the material benefits to be derived are negligible. This action would be "rational", even though the ends which are sought deviate from those assumed in the conventional economic model of preferences. Indeed, a research programme (of a characteristically Weberian kind) might investigate the circumstances - presumably, derived from the wider context of social networks, etc. - in which deviations from "economic" rationality occur.[4] This, in turn, would open up the possibility of analysing individual behaviour with respect to learning opportunities not in terms of some universal economic rationality, but rather of alternative rationalities which are socially constituted (cf. Lazar, 1996).[5]

Even more fundamentally, the critique of neo-classical theory raises the question of the extent to which behaviour in markets may usefully be conceived as the product of individual choice and decision-making at all. As we noted earlier, a conventional sociological approach emphasises the extent to which individuals are socialised into determinate normative structures and these, in turn, shape not only the preferences held by individuals, but also their perceptions of the feasible alternatives which are accessible. For example, most sociologists of education would be comfortable with the notion that, in Gambetta's (1987) words:

> *"...class-related inertial forces can affect the preference structure by altering the values attached to any given option: the working-class belief, for instance, that academically oriented schools are not 'for people like us', or vice versa, the upper-class belief that only academically oriented schools are 'for people like us'".* (p.15)

In this context, it is clear that the exercise of choice by the individual is highly constrained by a structure of taken for-granted presuppositions with respect to what is available and appropriately sought after. Moreover, this structure of presuppositions is systematic, in the sense that it is associated with a given location within - in this case - the relations of social class. What this suggests, therefore, is that there are definable relationships between individual preferences and the choices based upon them, normative systems and the locations in the social structure within which socialisation occurs. Tracing out these relationships would be a major element in uncovering how alternative rationalities come to be socially constituted.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the effects of socialisation: in other words, to avoid an over-socialised conception of the individual, where his or her action is viewed as a passive reflection of wider social forces. We should not substitute the neo-classical "asocial rational egotist" with a sociological "cultural dupe" (cf. Ingham, 1996, p.554). Hence, for example, even where the range of possible courses of action is perceived to be highly restricted, individuals remain able to compare alternatives and to choose "rationally" between them. Indeed, individuals are able to reject the preference structures into which they are socialised, as, for instance, any analysis of participation in adult education programmes demonstrates. Individual actors remain autonomous through exercising choice over the courses of action which they pursue, even though their choices are made within parameters which are set externally. Analytically, therefore, the task is to produce an account of the interaction of individual choice with its parameters (cf. Swedberg, Himmelstrand and Brulin, 1990, p.70).

It is also clear that these external parameters are not confined to the effects of socialisation. Individual choices are not simply constrained by socially constituted preferences, but also they reflect the social structure of actually available opportunities. Accordingly, preferences themselves may be shaped - whether through socialisation or more directly - by the reality of feasible alternative actions. Moreover, the scope of autonomy and choice is not neutral in the face of processes of social exclusion and integration, but is structured by these wider social relations. Individuals do not enjoy a level playing-field in access to opportunities for education and training (as for other goods and services); and this is true, in principle, irrespective of how people understand these opportunities. For example, changes in state provision of educational opportunities (consequent, say, on the 1944 Education Act) or in the organisation of economic production (leading to the expansion of women's employment, etc.) have resulted in structural changes in learning opportunities, whose implications have, arguably, only partially been absorbed into people's social understanding and normative structures; in fact, one of the interesting analytical issues here is precisely the disjunctive between these dimensions (for example, Rees, 1992, Chapters 3 and 4).[6]

All of this implies a much more complex set of social processes through which participation in lifetime learning is determined, than is derived from human capital theory. At best, the latter may be conceived as a partial account, which

may apply in rather specific circumstances. In the next section, we begin to outline a more general analytical framework, which attempts to build on the critique which has been sketched here.

TOWARDS A SOCIAL THEORY OF LIFETIME LEARNING

As we have seen, then, a major part of the sociological analysis of participation in education and training presents almost a mirror image of human capital theory and neo-classical economic analysis more widely. Here, the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on the constraints within which individual actors operate.[7] For example, patterns of attainment within compulsory schooling or of participation in post-compulsory areas of education have characteristically been analysed in terms of the changing structure of opportunities which are available (through state policies, etc.) and the differentiation of individuals' access to these opportunities according to their location within the social structure, particularly their class, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Clearly, much of the mainstream research on the effects of selective and comprehensive systems of secondary schooling illustrate this mode of analysis (for example, Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980). Similarly, many accounts of the shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education or of participation in adult education programmes fall into the same general mould (for example, Marsh and Blackburn, 1992; McGivney, 1993). And much the same can be said of a great deal of the research on the take up of opportunities for vocational training, whether supplied by the state or (although the analysis is far less developed) by employers (for example, Banks et al., 1992; Rees, Fielder and Rees, 1992).

Frequently, this conceptualisation in terms of the restriction of individual choice over courses of action has been used to permit the reduction of the complexities of individual behaviour to characteristic educational "pathways" or "trajectories" (the term which we shall use here).[8] Precisely because autonomy is bounded by external conditions, it is possible to identify regularities in individuals' educational experiences as they proceed through the life course. Hence, for example, Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) identified different routes through compulsory schooling, based on performance at key junctures such as the "11+" or "common entrance" examinations, and were concerned to elaborate on the nature and effects of the flows of individuals

from different social backgrounds through them. Similarly, Banks et al. (1992) develop the notion of "career trajectories" to encapsulate the contrasting experiences of young people during the years after they have passed the minimum school-leaving age; and again, these are related to key features of social background and previous education.

At one level, what is involved here is no more than the attempt to describe characteristic patterns of educational attainment, participation and so on. Individual educational experiences are simply aggregated into typologies, which may then be related to the opportunities provided and the social resources available from different backgrounds. However, the concept of the "trajectory" embodies a clear analytical element too. Our argument here has recently been elaborated by Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) through their invocation of Strauss' (1962) well known discussion; they say:

> *"Strauss (1962) suggests that we often describe this predictability [of individual 'trajectories'] according to one of two metaphors. The first is the career ladder. From this point of view, early decisions around the transition to work are the lower rungs of the ladder. As our lives develop we gradually climb, in a direction that is clear and predictable to a knowledgeable outsider. ... The other metaphor for career development ... is that of cooking an egg. Whether we poach it, fry it, boil it or scramble it, it will always be an egg. ... Working-class males, let us say, can develop in a variety of ways, but their central 'working-class maleness' will always allow the expert outsider to predict the range of opportunities and type of trajectory that they will follow."* (p.141)

What this highlights, therefore, is that there are two elements involved. Firstly, the "trajectory" which people join is very largely determined by the resources which they derive from their social backgrounds. Hence, to extend Strauss' (1962) example, working-class males' experience of initial schooling and subsequent education and training differs systematically from that of middle-class females; their access to learning opportunities is systematically differentiated by the social resources or capital available to them. Secondly, an individual's capacity to take up whatever learning opportunities are available is constrained by his or her previous history in this respect. Accordingly, once an individual has started out on a given "trajectory", then the probability of proceeding through its subsequent stages is relatively high;

the sequence of educational experiences is to a considerable extent cumulative. For example, if someone leaves school at 16 with no qualifications, this itself restricts subsequent access to further or higher education and to anything other than very limited vocational training (cf. for example, Banks et al., 1992).

We wish to argue that this concept of "trajectory" is integral to the development of an adequate social theory of lifetime learning. By extension from previous research, it is possible - although empirically complex - to identify a range of characteristic sequences of learning experiences through the life course ("trajectories"), which constitute the core of the explanandum of such a theory.[9] However, whilst these "trajectories" do certainly reflect an externally constituted structure of learning opportunities and socially differentiated access to them - as our earlier discussion suggests - it is necessary to elaborate a more nuanced account of their determinants. More specifically, we need to explore more fully the ways in which "trajectories" are eembeddedí in social relations more widely; and to take proper account of the interaction of individual choices and constraining parameters in the determination of courses of educational action.

In locating "trajectories" at the core of our theoretical concerns, attention is necessarily focused on processes of social change. Most immediately, of course, this relates to the sequences of educational experiences which occur through individual life courses. However, in addition, characteristic "trajectories" are themselves transformed over time; the kinds of "trajectories" which are typical currently are significantly different from those of earlier (and, indeed, by implication, future: see below) epochs. In other words, there is also a process of historical or inter-generational change, within which individual experience may be located. Accordingly, it is possible to mark out historical periods in terms of their pattern of typical "trajectories" (as, for example, Antikainen et al., 1996, p. 14, do for Finland). Clearly, transformations in the structure of available opportunities for education and training are key influences here. Changes in state education policies, in employers" strategies with respect to training provision or in community-based programmes of informal learning are all examples of ways in which characteristic "trajectories" may be restructured over time, through expanding or contracting the learning opportunities which are available. Moreover, such changes also impact upon the role played by individuals' social backgrounds in

differentiating access to such opportunities. For example, the post-war expansion of secondary and higher education in Britain, along with marked changes in employment structures, have contributed significantly to changing women's educational profile relative to that of men; what it means to be a woman in this context is different now from what it used to be (for example, Rees, 1992).

It is important to note, moreover, that these historical or inter-generational changes in characteristic "trajectories" underpin most strategies for building a Learning Society. What the latter involve is generating a set of typical "trajectories" (however defined) in the future which is significantly different from the present one. As we saw earlier, for instance, official strategies at the moment are predominantly concerned with shifting the mix of "trajectories" towards a situation where a much higher proportion of the population engage in the renewal of skills and competences throughout their working lives, irrespective of their location within the employment structure. In putting things in these terms, however, the partial nature of conceptualising the Learning Society simply as a desirable future objective is exposed. Viewed in this way, building a Learning Society becomes abstracted from what are in reality long-term processes of historical change through which patterns of learning ("trajectories") have been transformed. By focusing exclusively on a teleology of ends which remain to be achieved, a proper analysis of these processes of change may be avoided; indeed, this is precisely our claim with respect to current strategies derived from human capital theory. Moreover, this future orientation also permits the presentation of a kind of "Whig history" of the development of lifetime learning, in which the weaknesses and shortcomings of the present are conceived as the necessary preconditions of the achievement of a desired state of learning in the future. The possibility that elements of past practice were superior to the present or, to put it another way, that the development of participation in education and training may be distinctly non-linear, especially for particular population groups, is discounted, through a failure to engage with the complexities of the social processes involved.[10] As we have argued elsewhere, for example, in a region like South Wales, it may be that the collapse of employment in nationalised industries, such as coal, steel and railways, where initial and continuing training were provided for all employees and were integral to the internal labour markets leading to supervisory and managerial jobs, has brought about a significant deterioration in learning opportunities, at least for men. And

equivalent arguments can be made with respect to the demise of community-based learning through the Miners' Institutes. There is a real sense, then, in which substantial sections of the population now have learning opportunities which are significantly worse than their parents (or, more correctly, their fathers) enjoyed (Gorard et al., 1996; Rees, 1997).

This emphasis on the necessity of locating the concept of the Learning Society within an analysis of the complexities of change in social patterns of participation in learning necessarily draws attention to the specificities of place too. Quite simply, as our South Wales example begins to suggest, characteristic "trajectories" vary from one locality to another. It is, of course, widely recognised that there are substantial variations in patterns of, for instance, educational attainment and participation more widely, between different regions of Britain and even between more local areas (for example, Roberts, Dench and Richardson, 1987; Garner, Main and Raffe, 1988). However, the theorisation of such differentiation is much less developed. As we have noted, analytical concerns have characteristically focused on what are presented as national patterns and the location of individuals within a spatially undifferentiated social structure of class, gender and ethnic backgrounds (but see, for example, Coffield, Borrill and Marshall, 1986; and Ashton, Spilsbury and Maguire, 1990).[11] Certainly, there have been very few (if any) attempts to relate historical or inter generational changes in patterns of educational participation ("trajectories") to regionally and locally specific processes of social and economic development.

However, in the terms of our earlier discussion, precisely because characteristic "trajectories" are "embedded" in wider social relations, they reflect the spatial and temporal differentiation of the latter. Most obviously, the structure of learning opportunities and the impacts of its transformation are sharply differentiated between places. Hence, for example, although changes in state provision have been instigated largely at the national level, their effects have frequently been experienced most acutely in local contexts. Not only have many policy changes been implemented primarily at the local level, but also the interaction of national policies with local conditions has produced highly variable local impacts. For instance, the national policy of expanding learning opportunities for younger adults through, say, Youth Training, in reality had very different effects according to the local context of secondary and further education provision, employer participation and so

forth; and this is reflected in wide differences in take-up, completion, and eventual outcomes for young people (for example, Rees, Williamson and Istance, 1996). Similarly, even changes in provision in what has been conceived as a national higher education system exert distinctive impacts on different localities as a result of essentially local capacities to respond to new opportunities. Moreover, the effects of changes in industrial structure and associated employment opportunities, whilst deriving from wider national and international economic developments, are experienced in local labour markets and the educational and training opportunities associated with them (Ashton, Spilsbury and Maguire, 1990). For instance, colliery closures in South Wales were the result of shifts in international energy markets and national state policies, but their impact was to remove from particular local areas jobs and the training which went with them (Rees and Thomas, 1991). Likewise, decisions of multi-national companies to locate advanced manufacturing plants in regions like South Wales have introduced wholly new opportunities with respect to education and training, whose effects have been quite localised (Rees and Thomas, 1994).

Equally, whilst the processes of social differentiation of access to learning opportunities are pervasive, the form which these processes take may be affected by the local context (a point which has not been adequately recognised in conventional studies of educational participation and attainment). For example, the significance of someone's gender to their education and training is partly determined by the structure of local employment opportunities, as the collapse of a male-dominated employment structure in South Wales has illustrated (Istance and Rees, 1994); although this is clearly mediated by class background and the consequent extent of dependence on local opportunities (cf. Lovering, 1990). Accordingly, there are complex interactions between people's locations within the social structure, their spatial locations, and their access to learning opportunities. In short, then, the structure of learning opportunities to which individuals have access is not uniform from place to place; teasing out the precise empirical significance of this spatial differentiation is a major, albeit complex, part of the required analysis of characteristic patterns of "trajectories". And this, in turn, raises the possibility that strategies for building a Learning Society will have to take account of what may be significant variations between localities in learning resources (a point to which we return later).

Characteristic "trajectories" do not, however, simply reflect the constraining effects of structures of learning opportunities, even where the latter are properly conceived as "embedded" in historically and spatially differentiated social relations. The individual educational experiences of which they are comprised are simultaneously the products of personal choices between alternative actions.[12] This is seen most clearly where an individual opts to pursue a course of action which deviates from an established "trajectory"; what Ahleit (1994) refers to as the "biographical discontinuities" which result when, say, a redundant miner or a mother whose children have left home chooses to enter a university access programme. However, even where individuals' behaviour is consistent with typical patterns of learning ("trajectories"), it is always possible for them to do something else; their actions thus remain the product of choices and need to be understood as such. To reiterate a point made earlier, therefore, the analytical puzzle is to unravel the interaction of individual choices and constraining social parameters. This is, of course, a familiar and perennial problem in social analysis; and, in what follows, we do not claim any definitive contribution to resolving it.[13] Rather, our concern is to make an essentially pragmatic contribution to exploring the salience of these issues to an understanding of patterns of learning through the life-course (cf., Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996, Chapter 9).

At the most basic level, then, the choices which individuals exercise over their participation in education and training reflect the kinds of knowledge which they possess of the learning opportunities available. More interestingly, however, their actions are chosen in respect of preferences which are defined within what we referred to earlier as socially constituted rationalities; that is to say, individual choices are made over courses of action to be followed, but not in random ways. In the particular context of educational experience through the life-course, we suggest that a key concept in understanding the latter is that of "learner identity".[14] As Weil (1986) puts it, "learning identities" refer to:

> *"...the ways in which adults come to understand the conditions under which they experience learning as 'facilitating' or 'inhibiting', 'constructive' or 'destructive'. Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about 'learning', 'schooling' and 'knowledge'. The construct incorporates personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning, as integrated over time."* (p.223)

"Learning identity" thus encapsulates how individuals come to view the process of learning and, accordingly, provides the framework through which alternative courses of educational action are evaluated. Moreover, as Weil (1986) indicates, an individual's "learning identity" is essentially personal, with emotional as well as intellectual dimensions (cf. Sennett and Cobb, 1972). And yet, however personal "learning identities" may be, they remain the products of individuals' social experience. And here too, we wish to emphasise the ways in which the latter is pervaded by history and place.

Most obviously, then, compulsory schooling is a powerful source of "learner identity". Quite simply, those who have had a successful experience of learning at school are more likely to have developed a positive "learning identity" and therefore be readier to engage with learning opportunities in later life. But "learning identity" is not simply a matter of success or failure at school; it is also the product of more complex processes. For example, the forms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment associated with, say, the 1960s grammar schools, served to construct the learner in quite different ways from those made available within the secondary moderns of the same period or the progressive comprehensive of the 1970s. The "learning identities" that educational institutions aspire to engender in their students therefore vary both between different types of institution and historically as well. These factors thus underlie the ways in which the structure of learning opportunities (which, as we have seen, has itself been changing) has been evaluated differently by successive generations. To use a specific example from our current research, it may well be that the training opportunities which became available after coal nationalisation in 1947 were regarded very differently by the first generations of miners to experience them, whose schooling was overwhelmingly confined to elementary levels, compared with those who entered the industry subsequently, following what by then was universal secondary education. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere, for the earlier generations, the work-place training which they received, far from being understood in narrowly vocational terms, may well have constituted the most significant element of their educational experience as a whole (a point which complicates currently fashionable arguments about the vocational "relevance" of school-based education) (Rees, 1997).

It is also clear, however, that "learning identities" are not simply the product of formal education; they also emerge in relation to more informal learning opportunities, with rather different implications for the evaluation of alternative courses of action. Traditionally, the fields of sport and music have provided a minority of young people with the opportunity to develop a different conception of their own abilities from that gained through formal education (Furlong, 1991). For older learners, experience within political and community organisations can have a similar effect (Weil, 1986). Indeed, again as we have argued elsewhere, in particular places and epochs, this latter kind of activity has been much more significant in shaping "learner identities" than the formal education system. For example, historically in industrial South Wales, there is evidence of conflict between rather well articulated ideological systems, within which individual "learner identities" were developed, whose origins were very much in community-based activity. Hence, it is suggested that Non-conformism gave rise to a conception of education as individual cultural accomplishment, which contrasted sharply with the collectivism associated with what Lewis (1993) terms "workers" education" through the Workers" Educational Association, the National Labour College and so on. It remains to be seen, however, the extent to which the actual learning opportunities which these ideological systems supported were appropriated by individuals for their own particular projects; as, for instance, where miners used workers' education as a route to individual occupational mobility, rather than the collective advancement of the working class (Rees, 1997).

What these brief examples begin to illustrate, moreover, is the complexity of the social experience within which "learner identities" are rooted. Certainly, such experience extends beyond the formal institutions of education and, indeed, community-based learning too. Hence, for instance, the workplace is one key arena within which the "learning identities" forged through the formal education system may be renegotiated (or, alternatively, reinforced). As the experience of the coal industry suggests, what is involved here can extend beyond the specifically vocational; as we have suggested, nationalisation may have contributed as significantly to shifting characteristic educational experiences in places like South Wales as did the changes in education policy which comprised part of the same post-war settlement (Rees, 1997). Similarly, the development in recent years of a significant advanced manufacturing sector in the region, based to a great extent on foreign direct

investment, may in due course contribute towards an equivalent redefinition of educational experience and associated "learner identities". Moreover, these changes may have particular impacts on specific social groups: most obviously, women.[15]

These latter arguments also pose in an acute way the issue of changes in "learner identities" over time. Hence, for example, "educational and training cultures", embodying distinctive dispositions amongst peers towards education and training, may develop to reflect not only current socio-economic circumstances in a given area, but also the residue of the past (cf. Rees and Rees, 1980). For instance, willingness to undertake job-related training may reflect both the traditions of such provision in a locality, as well as the requirements of current employment patterns. Moreover, family life is a key vehicle through which such inter-generational transmission occurs. Some young people have grown up in families where continuing education and training is part of the routine cycle of employment life for family members; it is a naturalised form of experience. For others - currently the majority - the opposite is true. In these circumstances, then, participating in learning after compulsory schooling, when it does take place, demands a re-working of personal history (cf. Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996).

What all of this suggests, therefore, is a much more complex and nuanced social theory of lifetime learning than that offered by the currently dominant discourse of human capital theory. As should be clear, however, much of the foregoing remains tentative; it provides the basis for a systematic programme of empirical research, rather than a fully finished analysis.[16] Nevertheless, even at this stage, it offers some insights into the nature of the Learning Society, which we set out briefly in the concluding section of our paper.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At one level, our discussion suggests no more than the need to transcend conceptions of the Learning Society which are rooted in economistic models of market behaviour. Although, as we have argued, such conceptions currently dominate official discourse, this conclusion may, nevertheless, be regarded as unexceptional. However, what is significant is that it is rooted in an analysis of the social relations of lifetime learning, rather than simply

expressing an alternative set of normative preferences. Hence, choices with respect to participation in learning opportunities may be rational, without conforming to the preferences presumed in human capital theory. It is recognition of this simple point that, at least in part, explains well documented reluctance to take up opportunities (as, for instance, in the case of Youth Training). More generally, there is no reason to expect a simple consensus over the implications of education and training programmes: opportunities provided by the state or by employers may well not be construed as such by potential trainees or employees, for example. And this point, moreover, also problematises simplistic distinctions between education and vocational preparation; as we have seen, even workplace training may be constructed as significant educational experiences, given particular "learner identities".

It is also important to note that our stress on the complexity of the social relations of lifetime learning is more than some post-modern celebration of diversity for its own sake. In particular, locating these social relations within a framework which embraces both change over time and differentiation between places, has important implications for strategies for building a Learning Society. Most obviously, as we argued earlier, the inadequacies of conceiving the Learning Society simply as something to be achieved in the future are exposed. To be effective, strategies need to take account of the actual processes of change in learning opportunities which different social groups have experienced. Moreover, in doing so, the differentiation in this experience between both social groups and localities cannot be ignored. Indeed, rather than a uniform Learning Society, the aim of development is better conceived as the creation of a diversity of Learning Societies, which build upon the real-world complexity of the social relations within which lifetime learning takes place.

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NOTES

1. For an elaboration of these comments, see Fevre (1997).
2. It is a pervasive feature of the debates around the concept of the Learning Society that it is viewed as a state to be achieved wholly in the future. This is true not only of the official accounts sketched here, but also of what would be viewed as radical alternatives (for example, Ranson, 1992). This is a point to which we return later.
3. For a useful critical review of recent contributions to this area, see Ingham, 1996.
4. Fevre (1997) explores some possible alternatives to "economic" rationality in the context of participation in education and training in different national societies.
5. See Rees, Williamson and Istance (1996) for an attempt to apply these ideas to the decisions of school-leavers to reject Youth Training.
6. In his extremely instructive discussion of these and related issues, it seems to us that Gambetta (1987, especially pp.10-11) significantly underestimates the importance of these "*structural constraints*". Certainly, we wish to argue that they should constitute a major, independent dimension of the analysis, rather than absorbing them into the discussion of how preferences are shaped.
7. Ingham (1996, p.554) cites Duesenberry's well-known observation that "*...economics is about how people make choices and sociology is about how people don't really have any....*"
8. Despite the centrality of this notion to a great deal of research in the sociology of education, relatively little critical attention seems to have been paid to it. One recent exception to this generalisation is Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996), especially Chapter 9. As will be seen, their analysis overlaps in significant respects with our own.
9. For a preliminary account of such "trajectories" derived from our fieldwork, see Gorard (1996).
10. This tendency is most clearly exemplified in official discourse; see, for example, Department for Education and Employment (1995).
11. This is in marked contrast to what has been happening in social analysis more widely (for example, Massey, 1995, especially Chapters 1 and 8).
12. As Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) again remind us, this emphasis on individual autonomy leads Strauss (1962) to reject both the metaphors which he identifies as underpinning the notion of "trajectory". He

says: "*...neither metaphor captures the open-ended, tentative, exploratory, hypothetical, problematical, devious, changeable, and only partly unified character of human courses of action.*" (p.65) Our own approach retains a much greater sense of the predictability of people's actions.

13. The intense debate around the work of Bourdieu perhaps provides the best known exploration of these themes in educational analysis. As Jenkins (1988) suggests in one of his contributions to this debate, there may simply be no satisfactory resolution of the problem, beyond personal preference.

14. For an elaboration of some the arguments which follow, see Furlong (1996).

15. It has to be admitted, however, that there is little empirical evidence of such a shift as yet (Rees, 1996).

16. See Gorard et al.(1996), Gorard (1997) and Gorard et al. (1997) for an elaboration of the empirical research on which we are currently engaged.